

Foreword

There are some novels which, almost from the first word on the first page, arrest and infect you with their atmosphere, magic up a whole, particular, sensory landscape all of their own. When you're right bang in the middle of one of these novels, it can be hard to come to your senses, harder still to see out: what exactly are they doing and how are they doing it? Language, language, language, of course, is always the answer.

As soon as I became a reader at the age of five or maybe six, I was alert to the way a particular line-up of the right words could alter the whole flavour and texture of your day, make you feel differently about everything. And still, now, the novels I like best are the ones which unsettle you, stop you in your tracks, simply because the words have been melded together in such an unexpected, unbiddable, awkward – you might even go so far as to call it opaque – way.

'What's it like?' my husband asked me when I was a quarter of the way through David Pryce-Jones's *Shirley's Guild*. 'I don't know,' I told him, 'Or at least, it's kind of completely amazing, but I don't quite know what it is that's so amazing about it.'

And I still don't know. Or maybe what I mean is, I probably do know, somewhere inside me I suppose I must know, but even now I find it very hard to convey this in any useful or sensible words. I still don't quite understand what this novel is really about, or why it had such a profound effect on me. It's slippery and indefinable, it's about so many things. It made me think very hard.

It begins with a house, the very first line is about a house – 'a stone house' – and with that mention of stone, the tone is pretty much set. Stone is the texture of this novel – the dark, solid, almost primeval stone on which a whole, apparently unswayable, rural community stands. And a small child dies, but telling you that doesn't begin to describe this novel, because you never really

know very much about this child and that's not really the point. The point is the vivid, unexpected effect she will have on these people, this whole community: ferocious, lasting and also indefinable.

Shirley's Guild is a social and political satire, a psychological thriller, a bit of a comedy, probably a tragedy, maybe even a ghost story. Wise and comic, warm and gruff, a little bit scary, it's definitely a novel that defies any easy categorisation. Most interestingly, though, it explores a premise that has long fascinated me: the possibility that we all experience this world in precisely the way we need to experience it at any particular time. Emotionally, intellectually, viscerally. We create our own changing realities according to our changing emotional needs. We see what we need to see, feel what we need to feel. And – chillingly – we are capable of conjuring just about anything if we really need to.

In the few days after I finished the novel, I found myself haunted. Several times I brought it up, mentioned it to people I met, asked friends if they knew it, tried to start a conversation about it. And of course no one had read it or even heard of it – it's been out of print for some time – and this fact made me lonely. Because this novel – with its peculiar flavour of absence, its particular truculence, its eerie, intelligent beauty, its refusal to be labelled as one thing or the other – is one you long to discuss with other people. If you haven't read it yet, I envy you and I recommend it to you. It's a perfect thing, a jewel. It deserves to stay in print forever.

Julie Myerson
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